

Isaiah 9:1–7

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1 Introduction

Isaiah 9:1–7 is the climax of the narrative that extends from Chapter 6 to 8. God commissioned Isaiah to bring a hardening judgment to Judah (Ch. 6). The judgment unfolded in the Syro-Ephriamite War, when Ahaz led Judah to betray her vocation as a holy people (Ch. 7). The message of Immanuel proclaimed on the one hand the terrifying consequence of betraying the God who walked among the Judaeans, and yet on the other hand that judgment was not the final word of God (Ch. 8). The sign of Immanuel was transformed into a Messianic symbol, pointing forward to a time when God would return to avenge the oppressed Israel. And it is at this point of the Isaianic drama that we encounter the beloved Messianic oracle: “For to us a child is born . . .”

2 The Immediate Context

- Isaiah 8:19–22 provide the immediate context of the Messianic oracle. The passage describes how people of Judah relied on occult divination and witchcraft to regain control in a time of trial. (Such practices are explicitly forbidden by the Mosaic law: e.g., Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27.) The fate for these people would be darkness and gloom.
- An interesting question is why such a seemingly unrelated topic follows that of the tightly woven narrative of Chapters 7–8. Maybe to Isaiah, the forsaking of trust in the Holy One of Israel, and the substitution of other powers for God when one is overcome by the desire to manipulate one’s fate, run as a common undercurrent beneath Ahaz’s betrayal and the practice of spiritism.
- Yet in the midst of total darkness, a light will shine forth, and thus begin the Messianic oracle to which we now turn.

3 To Us a Child Is Born

- v. 1: The geography described here suggests a link to the historical context of the Syro-Ephriamite conflict. Specifically, the places mentioned are the regions in the Northern Kingdom conquered by Assyria in an earlier invasion (2 Kings 15:29). Although Isaiah prophesies that Assyria will be used by God as a vehicle to resolve the threat of the Syro-Ephriamite

coalition and thereby humiliate Israel, the lost lands will not be forever under the shadow of hopelessness.

- v. 2: The change of fortune will be brought about by a light, a symbol of God's active intervention.
- v. 3: This will be a genuine reversal of fortune, addressing the three fears of Israel in the face of military threats: (i) depopulation and exile, (ii) meager harvest, and (iii) becoming a target of spoil. Such will be the reasons for great rejoice.
- v. 4: The cause of the change of fortune ("for") is made explicit. God himself will liberate the oppressed Israel. Invoked here are allusions to the exodus and the Gideon narratives (Judges 6–7). Highlighting the Gideon's victory over the great army of Midianites reminds the readers that the eschatological liberation is brought about not by human strength, but by the power of God working through human weakness.
- v. 5: The consequence of liberation is that God will put an end to all wars and conflicts.
- v. 6: The eschatological era of eternal peace will be ushered in by a king. Continuing the motif of children, the ruler is not portrayed as a mighty conqueror, but as a helpless child through which God works wonder.

The royal titles of the eschatological ruler will be four¹, highlighting the characteristics of his rule: wisdom (Wonderful Counselor), might (Mighty God), enduring fatherhood (Everlasting Father), and peace (Prince of Peace).

- v. 7: This verse makes explicit that the picture drawn by the previous verses is an eschatological one, a picture in which the vocation of Israel as a just and righteous kingdom is finally fulfilled. And all these will be brought about not by human zeal, but by the determination of the Lord Almighty.

4 Technicalities

- The interpretation of this passage is in fact the locus of fierce scholarly debates. The traditional Messianic reading of the passage as adopted by the Christian Church has been under serious scholarly scrutiny in the past two centuries. During the Medieval time, Jewish commentators advanced the theory that the oracle is a coronation oracle celebrating the ascension of Hezekiah. From the 19th century till now many scholars have attempted to identify the ruler described in this oracle with various historical figures in the history of Judah (e.g., Hezekiah, Josiah or even Ahaz). Usually two observations are pointed out as evidence against a Messianic reading of the passage. Firstly, v. 1 appears to ground the text in a concrete historical setting rather than an eschatological future. Secondly, the royal titles in v. 6 do not necessarily imply the divinity of the ruler, but instead may simply be hyperbolic titles typically adopted by ancient Near Eastern rulers (e.g., Egyptians).

¹Or five if "Wonder" and "Counselor" are considered two titles rather than one. NIV reads one title: "Wonderful Counselor".

- One has to appreciate the plausibility of some of these theories, especially the ones identifying the prophesied ruler with Hezekiah. With the ascension of a king faithful to Yahweh (2 Chronicles 29), and with the weakening of the military might of the Northern Kingdom, maybe time is finally ripe for the reunion of the two Kingdoms under the banner of Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 30:1–5)? Maybe in such a time of hope, Isaiah speaks of this hopeful coronation oracle to celebrate the new era of Hezekiah's reign?
- Together with scholars such as Childs and Oswalt, I deem such theories ultimately untenable. (Was Isaiah simply delusional in hoping that Hezekiah would usher in an eschatological era of peace?) Such theories have overlooked the narrative structure of Isaiah 6–9. A Messianic reading of the text provides a natural climax to the plot of the ongoing narrative development. The failure of Ahaz as a Davidic ruler leads to the hope of an eschatological ruler through whose weakness God promises to bring about an enduring dynasty of peace and righteousness.

5 Final Thoughts

- Matthew sees in Jesus' Galilean preaching ministry the fulfilment of this oracle (Matthew 4:12–17). Yet this christological reading shall not be the only thing we learn from this passage.
- As we reflect upon how we are to establish a just society, we must never forget that ultimately full justice and righteousness are brought about by God rather than us. Yet the means whereby such a transformation is brought about is through a weak child. Our willingness to trust that God will work through our weaknesses is the key spirituality required of a servant of God.